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ABSTRACT

This study provides information about the actual functions and activities of school district evaluation units by examining an integral product of the units. This product, an evaluation report, was examined from a nationwide sample of district evaluation organizations (N=116). Reports were checked for the presence of particular evaluation report characteristics identified as important by evaluation researchers. The most frequently exhibited characteristics were descriptions of evaluation results, identification of data collection sources, and descriptions of data analysis procedures. Present in about half of the reports were descriptions of the purposes of the evaluation, conclusions, and comprehensive data collection sources. About one-third of the reports contained clear descriptions of the program under study and identification of evaluation audiences. Less than one-third of the reports provided conclusions which were congruent with information provided, described the actual implementation of the program under study, or discussed reliability or validity of the data collection sources. A subsample (N=16) examination of potential relationships between unit variables and report characteristics totals did not reveal many significant relationships. However, the larger districts generally had reports with larger numbers of important evaluation characteristics. (RL)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTRICT EVALUATION REPORTS*

by

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Characteristics of District Evaluation Reports

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Introduction

What do district evaluation reports typically look like? Results from the study reported in this paper show that a typical report might consist of only four main sections: an identification of data collection sources, an identification of data analysis procedures, a presentation of evaluation results and a description of program and evaluation participants. A typical report might also contain descriptions of the purpose of the evaluation, and conclusions.

It would not contain identifications of evaluation audiences. It would not have clear descriptions of the program or object being evaluated, or discussions of the implementation of the program. It would not present conclusions which were congruent with information provided.

A summary of a typical report might then read as follows: "This report presents the math test results of Bayview District eighth-grade students on the Suburban Test of Academic Achievement (STAA). All eighth-graders were tested in January 1981, on Form Z of the STAA. The following results are presented for each school in the district, in the form of percentile scores for each subtest of the STAA and for an overall math score."

Can these study results suggest anything about the practice of evaluation in school districts? Possibly some districts are practicing evaluation as if it were synonymous with measurement. Evaluation, as

currently viewed, involves the systematic collection of information about programs or materials or some other object in order to inform decision-making. Measurement focuses on the degree to which individuals possess certain attributes. Evaluation reports consisting of results presented independent of any particular program focus may represent an earlier evaluation perspective, which is better described as measurement than evaluation.

Now, this is not such a surprising speculation. Descriptions of evaluations which are not really evaluations are quite common. What makes the speculation more significant are the high numbers of districts which appear to be operating in a strictly measurement mode. Out of a national sample of 116 reports analyzed for this study, only thirty-eight percent of the reports had clear descriptions of the program or object under study in the evaluation. Only seventeen percent included descriptions of actual implementation of the object under study. And a remarkable thirty-eight percent of the reports consisted of test scores or survey results presented without reference to any particular program or described curricular area.

Purpose of the study

This study focused on one element of the educational evaluation scene: organizations in public schools with formal responsibilities for educational evaluation. Organizations in schools with formal responsibilities for educational evaluation are currently found in most of the large districts in the country, and in some of the smaller ones. Though the use of the term "evaluation" has become widespread only

since the mid-1960's, the existence of district departments or units with evaluation responsibilities is not recent. Units were originally formed in a few large cities during the 1910's and 1920's. These units, often called Research Bureaus or Efficiency Units, were generally formed to determine the "status" of education in the district. The units identified status by examining student aptitude and achievement test scores, and by studying information obtained from surveys sent to other districts. As the testing movement became more sophisticated, and expanded, so the number of research units increased. The standardized achievement test movement continued to dominate the activities of these units, and their conceptions of evaluation, until the 1960's.

In the 1960's the federal government first began to channel large sums of money into local districts for the establishment of new programs, particularly for disadvantaged students. The government required districts receiving these federal funds to evaluate the programs they developed. These formal evaluation requirements provided a new focus on evaluation, and served as an impetus for new interpretations of evaluation. Educators began to view evaluation as a formal, systematic process which involved more than the collection of norm-referenced achievement test scores. And, a large number of districts formed evaluation units for the first time, or added the name "evaluation" to the title of an existing unit.

Despite the changes that the new focus on evaluation brought for school districts, researchers have focused little attention on how districts carried out their new evaluation responsibilities. References

in the literature to district evaluation units between the mid-1960's and the present are scant, both in number and in content. The few that do exist focus on the organization or the administration of one, or at most several, of these district units. Little information is available about the characteristics of the units in general or about what these units are actually doing.

A purpose of this study was to provide information about the actual functions and activities of school district evaluation units by examining an integral product of the units. This product, an evaluation report, was examined from a nationwide sample of district evaluation organizations. Reports were checked for the presence of particular evaluation report characteristics identified as important by evaluation researchers to see what kinds of activities units reported, and if the activities reflected newer conceptions of evaluation.

A second study purpose was to determine if there were any relationships between the total numbers of evaluation characteristics present in a report and certain variables associated with the evaluation units.

Methodology of the study

This study examined the characteristics of school district evaluation reports from a national sample of district evaluation units. Additionally, variables from those units whose reports exhibited very high and very low numbers of evaluation characteristics were examined for possible relationships to the numbers of characteristics.

Information about the variables of interest to the study was obtained from survey questions which were part of a larger questionnaire sent to

heads of evaluation units by the Center for the Study of Evaluation, UCLA. The request for evaluation reports was also contained in the survey questionnaire.

Respondents receiving the Center for the Study of Evaluation complete questionnaire included all heads of evaluation in districts with student enrollment over 10,000, and a sample of evaluation heads in districts with student enrollments between 5,000 and 9,999 (N=388). Respondents were identified by a poll conducted by Center staff.

The sample for this study of district evaluation reports included all of those unit heads who responded to the Center's questionnaire and sent the requested evaluation report copy (N=116).

Characteristics of the reports were examined using a form developed for the study, based on currently suggested standards in the educational evaluation literature. The goal of the development of the form was to identify as small a set of standards of major importance to the quality of an evaluation or evaluation report as possible. Standards which were listed by four or more sources in recent evaluation literature were identified, tried out, reviewed, revised, and again tried out. The final form consisted of thirteen report characteristics (see Table 1).

Consistency of application of the form to evaluation reports was demonstrated by an inter-rater reliability check. Twenty-five percent of the reports were examined by two raters. Their inter-rater reliability was considered high enough to indicate consistency in the application of the report characteristics form (Alpha coefficients ranged from .80 to 1.00). The remaining reports were then checked by one rater.

Four additional reports were also solicited from a small sample of evaluation units to establish an idea of the general variability of the characteristic totals of different reports from the same evaluation units. Twenty-six of the thirty districts selected responded. An examination of the relationship between report characteristics totals of different reports from the same evaluation units revealed that there was some variability in the actual numbers of characteristics present in the reports; however, reports from individual units tended to exhibit total numbers of characteristics which fell into either "high" or "low" totals categories.

Units whose reports were in the upper and lower categories of total numbers or characteristics were identified. Certain variables associated with the units identified were then examined (using the Fisher exact probability test) for their relationship to the report characteristics totals.

Results

Study results are presented in two parts. Initially, evaluation report characteristics from the entire sample (N=116) are described. Then results are presented from additional analyses of a subsample (N=16) of the original sample. Variables from sampled units whose report totals were more than one standard deviation above or below the mean were analyzed for possible relationships to report totals.

District evaluation reports varied widely in the numbers and kinds of evaluation report characteristics they exhibited. A ranking of the evaluation characteristics according to the frequency of their appearance

across the district reports appears in Table 2. The most frequently exhibited characteristics were descriptions of evaluation results, identification of data collection sources, and descriptions of data analysis procedures. Present in about half of the reports were descriptions of the purposes of the evaluation, conclusions and comprehensive data collection sources. About one-third of the reports contained clear descriptions of the program under study and identification of evaluation audiences. Less than one-third of the reports provided conclusions which were congruent with information provided, described the actual implementation of the program under study, or discussed reliability or validity of the data collection sources.

The subsample examination of potential relationships between unit variables and report characteristics totals did not reveal many significant relationships. As might be expected, the demographic variables of district size, unit size, and unit budget were all significantly related to report totals; the larger districts, units, and budgets generally had reports with larger numbers of important evaluation characteristics.

Other variables which were significantly related to report totals were: (1) The director's evaluation experience. Units whose directors had evaluation experience, particularly district evaluation staff experience, tended to have reports with more evaluation characteristics. (2) The director's opinion that unit effectiveness could be improved by better communication to the superintendent and board. Reports from units whose directors felt that communication was an area for improvement often had more evaluation characteristics. (3) The director's

indication that unit data is utilized by federal agencies. An indication of utilization by federal groups was associated with reports containing more of the relevant evaluation characteristics.

Conclusions

Beyond the common elements of results presentations and an identification of data collection instruments and data analysis procedures, reports varied in the characteristics present. In part this variation probably reflects the state of the evaluation field; evaluators have a multitude of evaluation and reporting elements available from which to choose.

Additionally, however, it is possible that the report characteristics variation also reflects differing interpretations of what evaluation is by some district personnel. Educational evaluation, as it is viewed currently, involves the systematic collection of information about programs or materials or some other object in order to inform decision-making. The evaluations performed and reported by some units in this study do not appear to meet this description of evaluation. Sixty-two percent of the reports, for example, did not contain descriptions of the program or object under study so that the program objectives were clear, while eighty-three percent of the reports did not include descriptions of the form of the actual implementation of the object under study. Thirty-eight percent of the reports consisted of test scores or other results presented without reference to any particular program or any described curricular area.

Thus many of the reports concentrated on presenting results, either independently of a relationship to a described program or connected to

only a loosely-described program. Results, such as data about the achievement of students, do not in and of themselves, constitute an educational evaluation. Results, presented in a larger context, such as results of students in a particular program, do. This is because an integral part of today's conception of educational evaluation is that evaluation is for some purpose. The achievement test results of students in a particular program can be used to help make decisions about that particular program; test scores may help indicate, for example, whether the program should be changed, continued, or eliminated. Test scores of students, presented independently of a described program, are more difficult to use directly. Do low student scores in a curriculum area indicate the need to change teaching methods, materials, amount of time spent teaching the curriculum area, student or teacher attitudes, or any number of other possible changes? It is difficult to say.

An issue related to connecting results to particular programs is that of considering how programs are actually implemented. The goals or objectives of a program are one way of describing a program. But there can be, and usually are, differences between the way a program was conceived or developed and the way it is actually implemented in the schools. The experiences a student actually has in a program may be partly or even completely different from those in that program's described plan. It follows, then, that an important part of an evaluation would involve a look at the form of the actual implementation of the object under study; decisions could then be made about the program as it was actually used. Yet, descriptions of program implementation were present in only seventeen percent of the reports.

Other findings from the examination of report characteristics provide further support for this interpretation that some district reports do not represent evaluation reports. Forty-eight percent of the reports contained neither conclusions nor recommendations which were drawn from the results. The absence of conclusions does not reflect a concern for the purposes for which the results could be used. Additionally, in only twenty-eight percent of the reports were conclusions present and congruent with the information provided in the report.

If some of these reports do not appear to be evaluation reports, then, what are they? They may represent an older evaluation perspective described by Popham (1975) as "status determination" or "measurement." Measurement focuses on the degree to which an individual possesses certain attributes; specific programs or educational practices or variables are not the focus. The approaches used historically by research organizations in the schools have been measurement approaches. Ad hoc, status kinds of data, such as test scores and enrollment figures, were collected about the district; little examination and interpretation of the data in light of what it might reveal about local problems and their potential remedies was performed. Testing was a primary research organization activity, beginning with some of the first units organized and extending to at least the mid-60's. Thus units today which produce reports primarily composed of results are following a long tradition.

The results of the study suggest that the single most significant change which could be made in district evaluations and their associated reports is performing evaluations with a focus. Evaluation of programs, materials, practices, goals, or some other object is a basic, primary

step toward the ultimate goal of producing evaluation information which can be utilized. Many of the reports examined in this study lacked a specific connection to a described program or object; a reader could come away from reading the report wondering, "So what?"

Perhaps we as researchers, and more particularly as Division H members, should be more sensitive about the interpretations of evaluation as it is actually practiced across many districts in the country, and gear our research, development and technical assistance activities accordingly.

TABLE 1

EVALUATION STANDARDS FOR WRITTEN EVALUATION REPORTS

	YES	NO/CAN'T TELL
1. The program or product or other object under study in the evaluation is described so that its objectives are clear.		
2. The program or product or other object under study in the evaluation is described so that the form of its actual implementation is clear.		
3. The purposes of the evaluation are described; purposes may be stated in terms of the evaluation questions or objectives.		
4. Audience(s) for the evaluation information are identified.		
5. Participants in the educational program and the evaluation study, and how they were selected for participation, are described.		
6. Data collection sources, such as tests, records, or observation forms, are identified.		
7. The data collection sources are comprehensive enough to answer the evaluation questions.		
8. The reliability of the data collection sources, and the validity of the data collection sources for the purposes intended is described.		
9. Data analysis procedures are described or are evident (as in detailed tables).		
10. Evaluation results are described or presented.		
11. Conclusions or recommendations are drawn from the results.		
12. The congruence of the conclusions with the information provided is described or evident.		
13. The written presentation of whatever was done in the evaluation is clear (even if standards above were not met).		
TOTAL		

TABLE 2

EVALUATION REPORT CHARACTERISTICS MOST FREQUENTLY PRESENT IN DISTRICT EVALUATION REPORTS

Characteristic	Rank Order	% of Reports with the Characteristic
Evaluation results are described or presented.	1	97
Data collection sources, such as tests, records, or observation forms, are identified.	2	92
Data analysis procedures are described or are evident (as in detailed tables).	3	81
Participants in the educational program and the evaluation study, and how they were selected for participation, are described.	4	70
The written presentation of whatever was done in the evaluation is clear (even if standards above were not met).	5	65
The purposes of the evaluation are described; purposes may be stated in terms of the evaluation questions or objectives.	6	53
Conclusions or recommendations are drawn from the results	7	52
The data collection sources are comprehensive enough to answer the evaluation questions.	8	46
The program or product or other object under study in the evaluation is described so that its objectives are clear.	9	38
Audience(s) for the evaluation information are identified.	10	35
The congruence of the conclusions with the information provided is described or evident.	11	28
The program or product or other object under study in the evaluation is described so that the form of its actual implementation is clear.	12	17
The reliability of the data collection sources, and the validity of the data collection sources for the purposes intended is described.	13	10

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